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Religious Pluralism from the Catholic Point of View

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Abstract: The question about how religious pluralism should properly be understood from the Catholic point of view has been asked since the outset of Christianity. It was also formulated in the context of *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. The present article gives a theological interpretation of the sentence included in the Abu Dhabi document: "The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings." It argues that this passage should be understood correctly within the inclusivist paradigm that recognizes and confers to non-Christian religions and to religious pluralism a status *de iure* without jeopardizing the foundations of Catholic faith: the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. In conclusion, the question concerning the application of the assertion to the case of Islam has been explored.

Keywords: Religious pluralism, Christianity, Islam, pluralist paradigm, inclusivist *de facto* paradigm, inclusivist *de iure* paradigm, interreligious dialog

During his apostolic journey to the United Arab Emirates (February 3–5, 2019), in Abu Dhabi, on February 4, Pope Francis along with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, signed "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together." The document is very important to Pope Francis and has been well received worldwide.[1] Nevertheless, some Catholic circles have been shocked by the following affirmation concerning religious pluralism: "The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings"[2] [emphasis added].

1 The importance of this document is underlined by the fact that Pope Francis refers to it in his last encyclical letter *"Fratelli tutti." On Fraternity and Social Friendship*. In the Introduction, he states: "I have felt particularly encouraged by the Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, with whom I met in Abu Dhabi, where we declared that 'God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters. This was no mere diplomatic gesture, but a reflection born of dialogue and common commitment. The present Encyclical takes up and develops some of the great themes raised in the Document that we both signed" (FT 5).

2 *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.

The question concerns how this affirmation about the pluralism and diversity of religions should properly be understood from the Catholic point of view. This request was also addressed by the Bishops of Kazakhstan and Central Asia during their *Ad Limina* visit to the Vatican on March 1, 2019. In an interview given to Life Site News, Bishop Athanasius Schneider, auxiliary of Astana, explained that the Pope said that he could share the contents of their exchange on this point. This is what he said in the interview:

> On the topic of my concern about the phrase used in the Abu Dhabi document – that God "wills" the diversity of religions – the Pope's answer was very clear: he said that the diversity of religions is only the *permissive* will of God. He stressed this and told us: you can say this, too, that the diversity of religions is the *permissive* will of God.
>
> I tried to go more deeply into the question, at least by quoting the sentence as it reads in the document. The sentence says that as God wills the diversity of sexes, color, race and language, so God wills the diversity of religions. There is an evident comparison between the diversity of religions and the diversity of sexes.
>
> I mentioned this point to the Holy Father, and he acknowledged that, with this direct comparison, the sentence can be understood erroneously. I stressed in my response to him that the diversity of sexes is *not* the permissive will of God but is positively willed by God. And the Holy Father acknowledged this and agreed with me that the diversity of the sexes is not a matter of God's permissive will.
>
> But when we mention both of these phrases in the same sentence, then the diversity of religions is interpreted as positively willed by God, like the diversity of sexes. The sentence therefore leads to doubt and erroneous interpretations, and so it was my desire, and my request, that the Holy Father rectify this. But he said to us bishops: you can say that the phrase in question on the diversity of religions means the permissive will of God.[3]

From this long quotation let us draw two main statements. Firstly, according to Pope Francis, "the diversity of religions is the permissive will of God." Secondly, this diversity is not positively willed by God as is, for example, the diversity of sexes.

Undoubtedly, the quoted sentence from "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" can lead to "erroneous interpretations," and some theologians representing the so-called "pluralistic paradigm" in the theology of religions can refer to it in order to endorse their ambiguous theories. Nevertheless, one can query whether the interpretation given by Pope Francis, as it was presented by Bishop Schneider, is the only possible one from the Catholic point of view. The answer to this question is the main purpose of this paper. I would contend, it is not

3 See: "Bishop Schneider Wins Clarification on 'Diversity of Religions' from Pope Francis, Brands Abuse Summit a 'Failure.'"

necessarily. I will try to argue that from the Catholic perspective, it is possible to maintain that the pluralism and the diversity of religions are *positively willed* by God in his wisdom, without relativizing at the same time the truth about the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. In order to demonstrate it, I will proceed in three steps. Firstly, I will present how this above-quoted sentence can be erroneously interpreted in the sense of religious pluralism, as it is understood by the theologians who represent a pluralistic paradigm. Secondly, I will show the interpretation given by Pope Francis to Bishops of Kazakhstan, namely that "the diversity of religions is the *permissive* will of God" is in line with the teaching of the post-Vatican II Magisterium of the Catholic Church that considers religious pluralism as existing *de facto*. Thirdly, I will try to prove – and this is my position – that it is also possible, from the Catholic standpoint, to state that religious pluralism is *positively* willed by God and therefore non-Christian religions can be viewed as existing *de iure* (or "in principle"), this, however, without jeopardizing the constant teaching of the Church about the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.

In speaking about the Christian theology of religions, it has been largely accepted to distinguish three different paradigms: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. The exclusivist paradigm claims that Christianity is the only path of salvation. Historically, it was combined with the very literal interpretation of the formula *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* ("Outside the Church there is no salvation"). Nowadays this paradigm is represented by some theologians related to the conservative evangelical movement within some Protestant denominations, with authors like: Robert A. Peterson, Christopher W. Morgan, Daniel Strange, William Edgar, Eckhard J. Schnabel, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Stephen J. Wellum, Andreas J. Köstenberger, J. Nelson Jennings, and others. According to them, only the explicit faith in Jesus Christ is a saving faith. Consequently, those who have not such a faith cannot be saved. Stephen Wellum phrases it as follows: "Apart from the preaching, hearing, and believing of the gospel, there is no salvation."[4] Within the Catholic Church, there are very few, if any, followers of this stand. By contrast, there are more and more those who are attracted by the pluralist paradigm. Some of the very famous proponents of this position (like Paul F. Knitter, Raimundo Panikkar, or Roger Haight) are Catholic theologians. The pluralist paradigm contends that other religions are (or can be) equally salvific ways toward God as Christianity is. This is because Jesus Christ is not the unique and universal Saviour of the world but only the one who "represents" God's salvific activity in the world, and this is principally for Christians. Finally, the inclusivist paradigm maintains traditional affirmation about the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. Within this paradigm there exist two different approaches to religious pluralism. According to the first approach, non-Christian religions (except Judaism) exist as an expression of human longing for God, and their status as

4 Wellum, "Saving Faith: Implicit or Explicit?," 183.

well as the religious pluralism as such can be named as existing *de facto*. According to the second approach, non-Christian religions exist out of the will of God, and therefore, their status as well as the religious pluralism as such can be named *de iure*. The first approach is very well summarized by the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*. But there are some Catholic theologians who, being in line with the teaching of the Catholic Church, advocate for pluralism *de iure*. I am of this opinion as well.

These three different approaches to the issue of the religious pluralism will structure our reflexion hereafter. The argument of this paper will be that the above-quoted sentence from "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together," namely that "The pluralism and the diversity of religions […] are willed by God in His wisdom," can properly be understood within the inclusivist paradigm which recognizes and confers to non-Christian religions and to religious pluralism status *de iure*, without jeopardizing the foundations of Catholic faith which are the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church.

1. The Pluralist Paradigm: Religious Pluralism Is Willed by God and non-Christian Religions Exist as Equal Means of Salvation

In his article on the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, Paul F. Knitter recognizes that this conciliar document was, on the one hand, "monumental," "revolutionary" and "a milestone in the history of religions" that "opens up the future of interreligious dialogue in a bold and revolutionary way," but, on the other hand, he affirms that it "also poses serious and threatening obstacles to that future."[5] The problem is due to the fact that, as open as it might be, the declaration claims Christian superiority over other religious traditions. According to Knitter, "*Nostra aetate* inscribes a tension – maybe a contradiction – between affirming the value of other religions and the need for dialogue, on the one hand, and asserting the supremacy of Christianity – Catholic Church – over all other religions, on the other hand."[6] The American theologian correctly identifies the reasons of such a claim. They are related to the fact that echoing other Vatican II documents, *Nostra Aetate* speaks about the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. Knitter recognizes that the same abiding tension or contradiction is present in the Post-Vatican II documents of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church. He states: "In view of such clear assertions of the supremacy of Jesus Christ and his church over all other religious leaders and religions, liberals in the Catholic Church should not have been so surprised and chagrined at

5 Knitter, "*Nostra Aetate*: A Milestone in the History of Religions?," 50.
6 Knitter, "*Nostra Aetate*: A Milestone in the History of Religions?," 50.

Dominius Iesus."[7] According to him, the only solution to properly understand religious pluralism as a dialogue between equal partners is to reinterpret the traditional Christian teaching about the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and his Church. And this is exactly what he does in his theology of religions.

What is his proposal? It is to understand the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in terms of "a symbol," similarly to the attempt presented by the American theologian Roger Haight in his famous book *Jesus Symbol of God*.[8] Haight proposes to explain the uniqueness of Christ in terms of the so-called "Spirit Christology." He writes:

> God as Spirit, or the Spirit of God, is simply God, is not other than God, but is materially and numerically identical to God. […] But God as Spirit refers to God from a certain point of view; it indicates God at work, as active, and as power, energy, or force that accomplish something.[9]

In this perspective, he interprets the different Soteriologies and Christologies of the New Testament as well as the definitions of the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. He concludes that the core of Christian doctrine about Jesus consists in saying that "God and not less than God, is really present to and at work in Jesus, and that this is in such a manner that Jesus is a manifestation or embodiment of the reality of God."[10] This sentence is like a leitmotiv of Haight's Spirit Christology.

According to him, the assertion that the difference between Jesus and other human beings is "qualitative" – meaning by that "substantial" or "essential" – contradicts "the doctrine of the consubstantiality of Jesus with other human beings."[11] That is why he wants to express the uniqueness of Jesus only in terms of the "quantitative" difference. He asks: "If one says that the Spirit of God, which is God, is present to Jesus in a complete way, or in a fully effective way, in a most intense manner, need one say more?" So, according to Haight, one may understand that God as Spirit was present to Jesus in a superlative degree, and this is sufficient to convey his uniqueness.

This view about the uniqueness of Jesus has also been adopted by Knitter. According to him, all our "God talk" is symbolic. He states:

> To speak about Divine and things divine, we have to speak in symbols – that is, in metaphors, analogies, images. We should never think that our symbols or our notions capture all that can be said about God. Yes, they say something. But they never say everything. […] all our words, are "fingers pointing to the moon." Our words are never the moon itself.[12]

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7 Knitter, "*Nostra Aetate*: A Milestone in the History of Religions?," 51.
8 Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 8.
9 Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 447–448.
10 Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 462.
11 Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, 463.
12 Knitter, "The Meeting of Religions," 49–50.

The consequences of this stand are manifold in our understanding of Jesus, God, salvation and religious pluralism. Knitter recognizes that the proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God is the fundamental and distinguishing belief of Christianity. Nevertheless, the central category whereby he explains what it means that Jesus is the "Son of God" is that of "a symbol." This is what he writes:

> Symbols enable us to see things we would otherwise not be able to see. Symbols participate in that which they symbolize but cannot be identified with what they symbolize. A wedding ring, in the eternity of its circularity and in the preciousness of its material, truly participates in the love that it expresses; yet the love is so much greater than this little, but so important, ring. So when the first Jesus-followers called Jesus the Son of God, they were using a symbol that expressed for them the experience that to meet Jesus was to meet God. […] For them 'Jesus' and 'God' were almost the same thing. But they weren't the same thing![13]

To summarize, according to Knitter, Jesus' divinity is nothing more than the fulfilment of his humanity. Consequently, there can be other "Sons" and "Daughters" of God, in other religious traditions, who, like Jesus, have fulfilled their humanity in their lives.

There are two direct and extremally important consequences of this understanding of Jesus[14]: first, that God *is not* Trinity; second, that Jesus *is not* the Savior of the world. The words "Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit" do not, according to Knitter, designate the presence of three really existing divine Persons but they are the symbols or metaphors of "a mysterious immanence of God in the world – and of the world in God."[15] In other words, three divine Persons are just symbols.[16] Because Jesus is not God Incarnate, therefore – consequently – God in himself is not Trinity, and Jesus is not the Savior of the world. According to Knitter, Jesus does not cause God's saving grace but only reveals and makes known that this saving grace of God has already existed in the world. He, Jesus, also makes it real but he does it principally for Christians. The conclusion is that Jesus is not the only Savior of the world. And this is exactly what Knitter means when he writes: "Besides being more meaningful for many Christians, it also makes room for others, for other saviors in other religions."[17]

The final consequence of his understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus refers to his comprehension of the Church and her mission, as well as of religious pluralism. Knitter puts these three concepts together, because, as he explains, "one defines the other." And, because for him Jesus is not so different from Buddha or Muham-

13 Knitter, "The Meeting of Religions," 67–68.
14 The same could be said about the Christology of Roger Haight.
15 Knitter, "The Meeting of Religions," 54.
16 Knitter, "The Meeting of Religions," 54.
17 Knitter, "The Meeting of Religions," 70.

mad, who can also be seen as the "sons of God" in a symbolic way, therefore there is no such a thing like the uniqueness of the Church (Christianity). All religions are equally willed by God and should have the same status. Therefore, for Knitter the pluralism and the diversity of religions is equally willed by God as is the pluralism and the diversity of colors, sex, races, and languages, and they have the same equal status as have colors, sex, races, and languages.

In short, for the theologians related to the pluralistic paradigm, the affirmation that the pluralism and the diversity of religions are willed by God in his wisdom leads straight to the denial of the traditional teaching of the Church about the unity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. All religions are equally willed by God and are equal means of salvation.

2. The Inclusivist Paradigm (*de facto*): Religious Pluralism Is Not Willed by God but God Can Use Non-Christian Religions as Means of Salvation for Their Believers

The predominant paradigm accepted by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church as well as the majority of Catholic theologians is the inclusivist paradigm which recognizes the pluralism and diversity of religions as existing *de facto*. In other words, non-Christian religions, except Judaism, do exist as the result of the human striving after God. They are human constructs which have been allowed by God and even in some stage of their existence blessed and used by him as the means of salvation for their followers. In this sense, one can say, as the Holy Father said to Bishop Schneider, that they exist out of the *permissive* will of God.

Just before and after the Second Vatican Council, this position was held by the famous French Catholic theologian Jean Daniélou. According to him, the history of salvation is limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Whatever was before that history or is today outside of it can be called "prehistory" of salvation. As Jacques Dupuis remarks, "Daniélou draws a sharp distinction between nature and supernatural, or equivalently between religion and revelation."[18] Non-Christian religions (except Judaism) are the results of human striving after God and belong to the order of natural reason and "natural religion." By contrast, Judaism and Christianity are the result of the divine intervention and belong to the order of supernatural revelation and supernatural faith. Daniélou writes: "Christianity does not consist in the striving of men after God, but in the power of God, accomplishing in man that which is beyond

18 Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 134.

the power of man; human efforts are merely the response called forth by the divine intervention."[19]

Therefore, for Daniélou the main difference between the Judeo-Christian religion and non-Christian religions is that the former has its origin in God and his supernatural self-communication, while the origin of the latter is in man and his natural longing for God. God can, eventually, use these non-Christian religions as the means of salvation for their followers, but because of the natural origin, their status as well as the status of religious pluralism, is *de facto*. This position was also held by another French theologian, Henri de Lubac. According to him, the non-Christian religions do not play a salvific role for their members and cannot be labeled "anonymous Christianity." On this point, he disagrees with Rahner.

The similar position is held by the British theologian Gavin D'Costa. First and foremost, he recognizes that "the Holy Spirit is acknowledged to be at work from the time of creation and before Christ's incarnation."[20] To clarify this he quotes the Encyclical letter of John Paul II, *Dominium et Vivificantem* (1986), in which the pope makes two important statements: firstly, that the action of the Holy Spirit "has been exercised, in every place and every time" and secondly, that "this action was to be closely linked with the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, which in its turn exercised its influence on those who believed in the future coming of Christ" (*DV* 53). In other words, the saving action of the Holy Spirit has never been separated from the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption, as it has been said in "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes.*"[21]

D'Costa agrees that "the Holy Spirit can be found in the hearts of non-Christian people and also in their values, cultures and religions"[22] and so "the Spirit is at work in other religions."[23] However, he does not attribute a salvific status to non-Christian religions. Although D'Costa accepts that other religions can be seen as part of God's plan of salvation, he clarifies in which sense this is possible: "they can be seen as part of God's plan in so much as they provide *preaparatio* to the gospel, but not in themselves as a means of salvation."[24] His argument is very much based on the teaching of the declaration *Dominus Iesus*. Along with the position held by the declaration, he recognizes that to confer to non-Christian religions a status *de iure* and to recognize them as a means of salvation, "would be contrary to the faith" because it would

19 Deniélou, *The Lord of History*, 115–116.
20 D'Costa, "Christianity and the World Religions," 22.
21 "All people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this Pascal Mystery" (*GS* 22).
22 D'Costa, "Christianity and the World Religions," 24.
23 D'Costa, "Christianity and the World Religions," 24.
24 D'Costa, "Christianity and the World Religions," 35.

mean "to consider the Church as *one way* of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the Church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the Church toward the eschatological kingdom of God" (*DI* 21). He concludes: "The door is thus closed on trying to establish any form of pluralism *de iure*, but it is kept open to explore how these religions might be forms of 'participated mediation' in so much as their positive elements might actually be part of God's plan to lead all people to Christ."[25]

Summing up, according to this group of theologians as well as to the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, the origin of other religions and religious pluralism is not in God but in the natural human longing for God, but this does not mean that God cannot use them as instruments of his salvific activity towards their believers.

3. The Inclusivist Paradigm (*de iure*): Religious Pluralism Is Willed by God but Only Christ is the Unique and Universal Savior of the World

The third group of Catholic theologians differs from the previous ones on two points: compared with the first group, they recognize the uniqueness and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church; compared with the second group, they recognize the *de iure* status of non-Christian religions. This is, in my opinion, the direction of the right Catholic interpretation of the quoted sentence from "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together." The reflection of such theologians as Karl Rahner, Jacques Dupuis, and Francis Clooney endorse the stance that it is possible from the Catholic point of view to affirm that "[t]he pluralism and the diversity of religions […] are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings." In his commentary on the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, another American theologian, Francis Clooney declares:

> Much in the declaration is clear and helpful in enunciating important rules which should fruitfully guide the thinking of Catholic Christians who accept the creed as central to their faith: believe in Christ in accord with the creed as a whole, and as it is understood in the Catholic tradition; acknowledge the unique and universal salvific importance of Christ with reference to all theological issues; safeguard the unity of the Word and Son of God with Jesus of Nazareth, whose Spirit is working in the world, and understand this unity as it has been remembered and passed down in the church; avoid responses to pluralism which posit the leveling of religious differences.[26]

25 D'Costa, "Christianity and the World Religions," 34.
26 Clooney, "Implications for the Practice of Inter-Religious Learning," 157.

After this positive appraisal, Clooney raises some questions about the distinction that the declaration makes between "faith" and "belief" as well as about its understanding of "inspiration." Regarding the "faith-believe" distinction, he states that it "does not seem to do justice to the richer affirmation … that faith is a *dual* adherence, 'to God who reveals' *and* 'to the truth which he reveals.'" His argument is as follows:

> Were faith only "the acceptance in grace of revealed truth" and "the acceptance of the truth revealed by the One and Triune God", and assuming too that God reveals the truth in a single all-or-nothing gift, then it might fairly be stipulated that only Christians have this faith. But given the declaration's explanation of the faith as a "personal adherence of man to God" too, the denial of "faith" to the people of other religious traditions must be interpreted as also indicating that in other religious traditions there can be no relationship with God of the sort that counts as that personal adherence which is also faith. This is sad enough in itself, but it would also be contrary to what the declaration asserts later on, that God "does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches" (*DI* 8).[27]

The point Clooney is making here is that "the devoted Muslim or Hindu who adheres to God does in some real way have not only 'a life of belief' but also 'a life of faith' as defined in the declaration."[28]

His other point is about the "inspiration" of the scriptures of non-Christian religious traditions. According to Clooney, the teaching of the declaration is "confusing." He wonders how from the one side, the declaration can state that the scriptures of other religious traditions are not inspired by God's Spirit, and from the other side, it recognizes that "there are some elements in these texts which may be *de facto* instruments by which countless people throughout the centuries have been and still are able today to nourish and maintain their life-relationship with God" (*DI* 8). Clooney writes:

> By the Congregation's own description, then, it might reasonably be conceded that God is working among people of other religious traditions and guiding them through the action of Christ. We also know that the Spirit cannot be separated from Christ, who works in and through the Spirit; so one might dare to presume that the sacred scriptures of other traditions are already enlivened by the Holy Spirit.[29]

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27 Clooney, "Implications for the Practice of Inter-Religious Learning," 158–159.
28 Clooney, "Implications for the Practice of Inter-Religious Learning," 159.
29 Clooney, "Implications for the Practice of Inter-Religious Learning," 159.

Here Cooley does not assert that the scriptures of other religious traditions are as much inspired as the canonical books of the Old and New Testament, but that they are "in some way" inspired because God's Spirit is at work in them.

This is also the position of two other great Catholic theologians: Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis, to whom I would like to refer as well.[30] Both of them firmly hold to the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church. Nevertheless, at the same time, within the inclusivist paradigm they recognize the *de iure* status of the non-Christian religions and religious pluralism.

Karl Rahner argued in this direction already before the Second Vatican Council. In his famous article "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions"[31] he presents four theses. The first one: "Christianity understands itself as the absolute religion, intended for all men, which cannot recognize any other religion beside itself as of equal right."[32] The second:

> Until the moment when the gospel really enters into the historical situation of an individual, a non-Christian religion (even outside the Mosaic religion) does not merely contain elements of a natural knowledge of God. … It contains also supernatural elements arising out of the grace which is given to men as gratuitous gift on account of Christ. For this reason a non-Christian religion can be recognized a *lawful* religion (although only in different degrees) without thereby denying the error and depravity contained in it.[33]

The third thesis is a consequence of thesis two, arguing in favor of "anonymous Christians."[34] The fourth thesis is about the actuality of Christian mission and the understanding of the Church as "the historically tangible vanguard and the historically and socially constituted explicit expression of what the Christian hopes is present as hidden reality even outside the visible Church."[35]

Central to his argument and the most important is the second thesis whereby Rahner gives the theological justification of religious pluralism as existing *de iure*. He divides it into two parts. Firstly, he contends that "there are supernatural grace-filled elements in non-Christian religions."[36] This is a key idea of Rahner's theology of religions based on his theology of grace which he comprehends as "the divine self-bestowal" that "penetrates to the ultimate roots of man's being, to the inner-most depths of his spiritual nature, and takes effect upon him from there, radically re-ori-

30 Francis X. Clooney (*Comparative Theology*, 16) recognizes that his comparative theology is in harmony with the theology of religions of Karl Rahner and Jacques Dupuis.
31 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 115–134.
32 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 118.
33 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 121.
34 See Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 131–133.
35 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 133.
36 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 121.

entating this nature of his towards the immediate presence of God."[37] He calls it "supernatural existential."

> This "supernatural existential" or mode of being (as we may call this finality and dynamic impulse which makes us tend towards the immediate presence of God) is indeed the outcome of grace. But it is inserted into man's nature through the salvific will of God to become an abiding element in his spiritual mode of being, and as something that is a living force in an always and everywhere, whether accepted or rejected by man's own free will.[38]

This "supernatural existential," which is an abiding element of the spiritual existence of all human beings, is constituted by the salvific will of God.

The other part of Rahner's second thesis consists in saying that the non-Christian religions need to have a positive significance and be considered "lawful religions," therefore, having the status *de iure*.[39] On the example of biblical Judaism, which was the lawful religion although it contained some false teaching given by the pseudo-prophets, Rahner argues that "we must therefore rid ourselves of the prejudice that we can face a non-Christian religion with the dilemma that it must either come from God in everything it contains and thus correspond to God's will and positive providence, or be simply a pure human construction."[40] Furthermore, he contends that admitting that each individual human being has the possibility in their lives of partaking in a genuine saving relationship with God,[41] and due to the social nature of human beings, non-Christian religions are willed by God as the means of salvation. He explains: "If … man can always have a positive, saving relationship to God, and if he always had to have it, then he has always had it within *that* religion which in practice was at his disposal by being a factor of his sphere of existence."[42] It does not mean that the non-Christians religions are "lawful in *all* their elements," neither is their status similar to the biblical Judaism of the Old Testament or Christianity.[43] His point is to say that "by the fact that in practice man, as he really is, can live his proffered relationship to God only in society, man must have had the right and indeed the duty to live this relationship to God within the religious and social realities offered to him in his particular historical situation."[44]

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37 Rahner, "Church, Churches and Religions," 34.

38 Rahner, "Church, Churches and Religions," 34–35.

39 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 125.

40 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 127.

41 This is also the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern Word *Gaudium et Spes*: "For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery" (*GS* 22).

42 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 128.

43 See: Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 130–131.

44 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 131.

Also, according to the Belgian theologian, Jacques Dupuis, in God's salvific plan for humanity, non-Christian religions have a positive role to play. In other words, non-Christian religions exist not only *de facto* but *de iure*. They are the means of salvation for their believers willed by God. Referring to Saint's Irenaeus theology of four covenants struck by God with humankind, Dupuis affirms that "nothing in the succession of the four divine covenants suggest that one abolishes those preceding, any more than one form of the fourfold Gospel substitutes for the other forms. All covenants hold together even as do the four Gospels."[45] It does not mean that all religions are equal, as pluralist theologians hold. Dupuis speaks about the "differentiated" and "complementary" revelations in three different stages. He writes:

> Three stages can be … distinguished – which do not correspond to a chronological sequence. In the first stage, God grants to the hearts of seers the hearing of a secret word, of which the sacred scriptures of religious traditions of the world contain, at least, traces. In the second stage, God speaks officially to Israel by the mouth of its prophets, and the entire Old Testament is the record of this word and of human responses to it. In both of these two stages, the word of God is ordered, however differently in each, to the plenary revelation that will take place in Jesus Christ. At this third stage, God utters his decisive word in him who is "the Word," and it is to this word that the whole New Testament bears witness.[46]

So, there is a clear distinction between the biblical Judaism of the Old Testament in which God "speaks officially to Israel" and the other non-Christian religions where the word of God uttered to their sages is not recognized as "official," and between the religion of the Judaism of the Old Testament and Christianity where "God utters his decisive word in him who is 'the Word.'" Nevertheless – and this is the point that Dupuis makes – God is really present and operating in non-Christian religions as the means of salvation. Furthermore, like Clooney, he is in favor of applying the terms "revelation" and "inspiration" to the other religious traditions and their sacred scriptures in the broader sense of these categories.[47]

In such a perspective, sketched out by these three great Catholic theologians, I place my own interpretation of the controversial sentence from "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together": "The pluralism and the diversity of religions [...] are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings."

45 Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 225.
46 Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 250.
47 See: Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 251.

Conclusion – the Case of Islam

In the conclusion, let us try to apply the aforementioned positions to the case of Islam. According to the pluralistic paradigm, Islam is one among many religions which is equally willed by God as Judaism and Christianity and can equally serve for its followers as a means of salvation. Christian theologians representing this paradigm would interpret the above-quoted sentence from "A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" – "The pluralism and the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings" – in its most literal sense. They would argue that as the pluralism and the diversity of color, sex, race, and language are positively and historically willed by God in his wisdom; also, the pluralism and the diversity of religions are positively and historically willed by God in his wisdom, and therefore Islam, as a religion, is positively and historically willed by God in his wisdom as much as Christianity and other religions are. Saying so they would not, however, endorse the Muslim claim about Islam as the seal of God's revelation because, according to them, neither religion can have that kind of claim. All religions are equal in all respects.

From the second (= first inclusivist) perspective, the pluralism and the diversity of religions are not positively and historically willed by God in his wisdom. Hence, they do not exist *de iure* but only *de facto*. Only Judaism and Christianity are positively and historically willed by God in his wisdom and therefore, they have a status *de iure*. By saying this the proponents of this position do not deny that God can "use" other religions as means of salvation for their believers and that the Spirit, who "blows where he wills" (cf. John 3:8), can also be present and active in them in a salvific way. In this sense, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council argue that Islam is not only a natural religion but has the supernatural elements of divine revelation as well. Summarizing his findings about the teaching of Vatican II on Islam, Gavin D'Costa makes two important points. Firstly, he notices that "Islam is not seen purely as a natural religion, although it may also be that."[48] This is so primarily because Muslims "along with us [Christians] adore the one and merciful God" (*LG* 16) who "lives and exists in Himself, merciful and wields all power," and who is "the Creator of heaven and earth who has spoken to humanity" (*NA* 3). Secondly, "Islam is also seen to operate within an Abrahamic typology, but not in historical covenantal lineage to Abraham."[49] Adequately, according to the teaching of Vatican II as well as to this inclusivist position upholding that non-Christian religions have a status *de facto*, Islam is a religion which contains the supernatural elements of divine revelation and can be used by God as a means of salvation for Muslims, but is not in historical cove-

48 D'Costa, *Vatican II. Catholic Doctrines on Jews & Muslims*, 210.
49 D'Costa, *Vatican II. Catholic Doctrines on Jews & Muslims*, 210.

nantal lineage to Abraham and cannot be viewed as positively and historically willed by God in his wisdom. Rather it should be considered as the result of the permissive will of God.

Considering the third (= second inclusivist) perspective which attributes to non-Christian religions a status *de iure*, the pluralism and the diversity of religions are seen as positively willed by God in his wisdom, but it does not imply that all of them are equal to Christianity and are formally and historically established by God. This is also true for Islam as a religion. Some theologians related to this perspective, like Jacques Dupuis, contend that the Qur'an can to some extent be considered as inspired by God and Muhammad as a prophet of God. Yet, even they do not contend that Islam as a religion was formally and historically established by God. I agree with Dupuis admitting that "the Qur'an in its entirety cannot be regarded as the authentic word of God. Error is not absent from it," and "this does not prevent the divine truth it contains from being the word of God uttered through the prophet."[50] These words echo what Clooney says about the understanding of the concept of "inspiration," namely that the sacred scriptures of other religions "are *in some way* really 'inspired' by God, since the Spirit is at work in them."[51] They also resonate with Rahner's assertion that "a non-Christian religion can be recognized as a *lawful* religion although only *in different degrees*."[52]

In conclusion, one can state that Islam, as a religion, is willed by God. However, it is not a historical religion but a religion in general terms. In other words, as Christians, we cannot affirm that Islam has been formally and historically established by God as is the case of Judaism and Christianity. There is no theological substantiation for such a conclusion in the Christian revelation.

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50 Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 245. My views differ from those of Jacques Dupuis: instead of calling Muhammad a prophet, I prefer to use the wording "man of God."

51 Clooney, "Implications for the Practice of Inter-Religious Learning," 159.

52 Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," 121.

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